DESCRIPTION

Dishwasher with a system for recognition of filling level

[001] The present invention relates to a dishwasher with a system for recognition of the fluid level of the rinsing fluid contained in the dishwasher.

[002] Dishwashers with devices for filling level recognition are known wherein the fluid level is detected by mechanical means, for example, by floats. In devices of this type, the float floats on the liquid surface as soon as the fluid level in the dishwasher exceeds a certain level. The float is usually connected to a mechanical micro-switch which changes its switching state as a result of the floating movement of the float and passes a corresponding signal to the program controller of the dishwasher. Malfunctions frequently occur in devices of this type if, for example, as a result of the current loading of the micro-switch contacts being too low, their switching reliability is not ensured, which results in inadequate switching behaviour. Furthermore, floats can be raised by air bubbles ascending in the rinsing fluid and thus the micro-switch can be actuated without the desired fluid level actually being present.

[003] Other systems for detecting the fluid level in a dishwasher use a pressure capsule which is compressed as the fluid level rises. The fluid level in the dishwasher can be determined from the extent of the compression of the pressure capsule. The known systems for filling level recognition all have the disadvantage that they have a number of mechanically moveable parts which are liable to wear and contamination, for example, by deposited dishwashing residue which can result in tolerance problems to the extent of complete failure of the device for filling level recognition.

[004] It is the object of the present invention to provide a dishwasher with a system for filling level recognition which reliably determines the fluid level in the dishwasher without using moving parts whilst keeping production costs low.

[005] This object is achieved by the dishwasher according to the invention having the features of claim 1. Advantageous further developments of the invention are characterised in the dependent claims 2 to 10. The dishwasher according to the invention comprises at least one washing container for receiving items to be washed and a system for recognition of the fluid level of the rinsing fluid contained in the dishwasher, wherein at least one capacitive filling level sensor is provided whose electrical capacitance changes on contact with the rinsing fluid.

[007] An advantage of the dishwasher according to the invention is that in the system for recognition of the filling level according to the invention the mechanical micro-switches usually used previously are replaced by a purely electronic sensor system, thus eliminating problems arising from too-low switching currents and the switching uncertainties caused thereby. A malfunction caused by vibration or frothy rinsing fluid cannot occur in the capacitive detection of fluid level according to the present invention. The system according to the invention is consequently more stable and yields results having higher reproducibility than the known systems for filling level recognition.

[007] A further advantage of the dishwasher according to the invention can be seen in that moving components required previously are eliminated whereby both the assembly effort and therefore the productions costs can be reduced and the failure rate is lowered because of the reduction in components. Since the fluid level in the dishwasher is determined without moving parts and merely by using electronic components, the system for recognition of fluid level according to the invention is largely not liable to wear and contamination by deposited food residues. Since space no longer needs to be taken into account for mechanical devices, another advantage of the system for recognition of fluid level according to the invention is that it only requires a very small amount of space and thus can be accommodated almost arbitrarily, even in inaccessible locations in the dishwasher.

[008] The rinsing fluid used in dishwashers corresponds to a solution mixed with cleaning agents, which substantially consists of water. Water has a relative dielectric constant of ε_w = 81 which differs significantly from the dielectric constant of air (ε_L = 1). This significant difference between the dielectric constants of water and air is used as the physical basis in the system for filling level recognition according to the present invention to determine the fluid level in the dishwasher. For this purpose, the filling level sensor is constructed in the fashion of a capacitor whose electrical capacitance varies depending on the height of the filling level. The variation in the electrical capacitance of the capacitive filling level sensor is based on the physical law that in addition to the capacitor area and its spacing, the electrical capacitance of a capacitor depends on the dielectric constant of the medium or the dielectric that is located in the electromagnetic field formed between the capacitor surfaces. These relationships can be represented by the following equation where C is the electrical capacitance of the capacitor, A is the capacitor area, d is the distance between the capacitor surfaces and ε is the dielectric constant of the dielectric:

[009] $C = \varepsilon A/d$.

[010] If the dielectric or the medium which is located in the electromagnetic field between the capacitor surfaces, changes, the factor of the dielectric constant ε also varies. Since the other factors in the aforesaid equation remain unchanged, the capacitance of the capacitive filling level sensor varies in direct proportion to the variation in the dielectric constant of the dielectric. In a preferred embodiment of the present invention, the electrical capacitance of the filling level sensor varies depending on the dielectric constant of the medium surrounding the filling level sensor.

[011] In the device according to the invention for recognition of filling level, a filling level sensor is used which represents only one capacitor surface whilst the other capacitor surface is formed by the surroundings of the filling level sensor. This means in the specific application according to the present invention that the electrical capacitance of the capacitive filling level sensor is approximately increased by a factor of 81 when the filling level sensor is surrounded by water instead of air. This change in capacitance can appropriately be detected and evaluated using an electronic circuit connected to the capacitive filling level sensor.

[012] According to a further preferred embodiment of the present invention, at least two filling level sensors are provided between which an electric circuit is closed as soon as the filling level sensors simultaneously come in contact with the rinsing fluid. In this case, it is sufficient if this electric circuit only utilised low current. In this embodiment the different electrical conductivity of water and air is used as a reliable distinguishing feature to determine whether the filling level sensors are surrounded by air or by water, i.e. whether the level of the rinsing fluid in the dishwasher has reached a certain height or not.

[013] It is especially advantageous if the system for filling level recognition additionally has electronic means which detect the electrical capacitance or the electrical conductivity of the filling level sensor and its variation preferably qualitatively and quantitatively. By quantitatively detecting the variation in the electrical capacitance or the electrical conductivity of the filling level sensor, it is not only determined whether a certain fluid level is reached, exceeded or fallen below but preferably also the exact height of the fluid level. Such an electric circuit can be implemented in a particularly practical manner in the form of one or more integrated circuits which are favourable to manufacture and require little space. In addition, one or more integrated circuits can be provided which are capable of evaluating the signals from a plurality of active sensor surfaces.

[014] The area of the filling level sensor which comes in contact with the rinsing liquid can have any shape. However, a qualitative determination of the liquid level by means of a single filling level sensor is favoured if the area of the filling level sensor which comes in contact with the rinsing liquid has a extended, substantially rectangular shape. If a filling level sensor having a rectangular contact area is disposed vertically in the washing container of the dishwasher, as the liquid level rises an increasingly larger area of the filling level sensor is covered with rinsing liquid. As a result of the increasing contact area between the filling level sensor and the rinsing liquid, the electrical capacitance of the filling level sensor varies successively. This variation can be detected and evaluated by the electronic means connected to the filling level sensor in order to determine the exact fluid level therefrom.

[015] The capacitive filling level sensor is appropriately disposed in the dishwasher such that a specific fluid level in the dishwasher can be determined by the filling level sensor or it can be determined if this fluid level is exceeded or fallen below. It is also possible to allocate gradations of the change in capacitance of the filling level sensor to specific fluid levels of the washing liquid in the dishwasher so that it is possible to determine not only whether certain fluid levels have been exceeded or fallen below, but also the exact height of the fluid level in the washing container of the dishwasher can be determined using the capacitive filling level sensor according to the invention.

[016]

[017] In addition, according to a further preferred embodiment of the present invention, one or more filling level sensors are arranged at a specific height in the washing container. Thus, for example, a filling level in the washing container of the dishwasher which is too high or too low can be recognised by arranging a filling level sensor in the washing container at the height of a maximum and/or a minimum fluid level. During operation of a dishwasher, in particular two specific fluid levels are generally of particular importance. These are firstly the so-called filling level corresponding to the desired or optimal fluid level for a washing process and secondly, the so-called safety level which marks the maximum fluid level at which the dishwasher can still operate without any problems. In a further preferred embodiment of the present invention, the system for recognition of filling level therefore comprises a plurality of filling level sensors which are disposed at the height of specific fluid levels, such as the filling level and the safety level.

[018] If the levels between the optimal filling level and the safety level are close together, it is also possible to determine or monitor both levels using one filling level sensor. For this

purpose, a filling level sensor is arranged in each case at the height of the specific levels for optimally filling and the safety level in the washing container. As a result of the gradual change in the electrical capacitance of the filling level sensor as the fluid level rises or falls and if corresponding reference values are provided in the electronic memory means, the instantaneous fluid level of the rinsing fluid in the washing container can be determined by comparing the capacitance of the filling level sensor which is actually determined, with the stored reference values. In this way, a plurality of fluid levels can be monitored or controlled using only one filling level sensor.

[019] The presence of rinsing fluid and its fluid level at different points in the dishwasher can also be determined by using a plurality of filling level sensors. For example, one filling level sensor can be arranged in the bottom tray of the dishwasher to determine the rinsing fluid which has run out from the washing container into the base assembly.

[020] Since the capacitive filling level sensors only require an extremely small amount of space, their shape can be adapted to almost any fixing situation and since the material condition of the sensor surfaces embodied as thin metal films is very flexible, the filling level sensors can be arranged at almost any positions on the washing container of the dishwasher. Thus, a position which is extremely inaccessible for a mechanical solution or which has extremely restricted space requirements can be selected. Furthermore, the shape of the active sensor surfaces themselves can be adapted to the space requirements at the relevant location in the dishwasher.

[021] In order that the fluid level in the dishwasher can be determined as accurately as possible, the filling level sensor is located inside the washing container preferably at a location protected from spray water. This can avoid the determination of the fluid level in the dishwasher being falsified by spray water which can come in contact with the filling level sensor during washing. For easy mounting of the filling level sensor it is particularly advantageous if a fixing strip of the filling level sensor is provided with a self-adhesive layer. In this way, the filling level sensor can easily be position on the wall of the washing container, for example, without needing to damage this for screw fixings or similar.

[022] The present invention is explained in detail hereinafter using a preferred embodiment with reference to the appended drawings.

[021] Figure 1 is a schematic diagram of a system for recognition of filling level according the present invention in a first preferred embodiment. The system for recognition of filling level

shown comprises a filling level sensor 1 which is located at a specific height in the washing container of the dishwasher. As soon as the rinsing fluid has reached this specific height, it comes in contact with the filling level sensor 1 whereupon the filling level sensor 1 changes its electrical capacitance. In addition, a second filling level sensor 2 is provided, which is disposed for example in the base assembly of the dishwasher. The second filling level sensor 2 can be used to determine whether rinsing fluid has flowed from the washing container into the base assembly, since the filling level sensor 2 changes its capacitance when it comes in contact with rinsing liquid.

[024] The filling level sensors 1 and 2 consist of electrically conducting material and are each connected by an electrical lead to a sensor circuit which detects and evaluations the change in the electrical capacitance of the filling level sensors. The sensor circuit comprises one or more integrated circuits specially programmed to evaluate the signals delivered by the filling level sensors. The result of this evaluation is passed from the sensor circuit via an output lead to the program controller of the dishwasher which, if necessary, initiates measures to change the level of the rinsing fluid in the dishwasher, such as opening a valve for the fresh water supply, actuating the lye pump to pump out rinsing fluid from the dishwasher or activating a warning that rinsing fluid has flowed out of the washing container into the base assembly of the dishwasher.

[025] In a second embodiment of the present invention both filling level sensors 1 and 2 are located in the washing container of the dishwasher and exposed to a low current so that a low current circuit is closed between them as soon as both filling level sensors simultaneously come in contact with rinsing fluid. In this way, it can be determined whether the level of rinsing fluid in the dishwasher has reached the height of the upper filling level sensor 1 or has fallen below this level again.